

# THE PEACE NARRATIVE AND INTERFAITH NOTIONS OF *SEKAR AYU* COMMUNITY

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## ABSTRACT

*The presence of Islamist activism in Ngargoyoso encourages the role of places of worship from places of voice of harmony to mouthpieces of intolerance. Sekar Ayu's interfaith women community counters the intolerant narrative. How did Sekar Ayu proclaim peace in Ngargoyoso? The purpose of this study is to determine the role of Sekar Ayu in building peace in Ngargoyoso. This research is a descriptive qualitative research with a sociology of religion approach. Data collection was through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Its data analysis uses interactive analysis models including data reduction, data delivery, and conclusions. Sekar Ayu's interfaith women community as a social movement of Ngargoyoso civil society is actively developing a culture of peace. First, Sekar Ayu actively builds communication and dialogue between religious groups and advocates for humanitarian and religious issues at the lower community level based on places of worship. Second, Sekar Ayu became a space for interfaith community encounters with various activities such as places of worship and family gatherings in it with discussions about religious, social, and cultural issues as a form of life dialogue. Third, Sekar Ayu empowers interfaith women to build a mutually beneficial life between religious groups. Fourth, Sekar Ayu's activities are expected to be a dialogue of sustainable life by emphasizing an inclusive, pluralist perspective, by promoting religion as a social ethic.*

**Keywords:** *Interfaith Women; Place of Worship; Sekar Ayu; Ngargoyoso; Peace Narrative*

## INTRODUCTION

The position of women in religion has so far been considered insufficient to have a place, especially in the development of a culture of peace. Women as part of communities of places of worship are social capital that can be developed to detect and prevent the threat of intolerance from developing in society, including encouraging the strengthening of tolerance and peace. Places of worship should be restored to their original function as peacebuilders. Islamist activism has made the stigma of places of worship bad and political. If previously places of worship

were understood as social institutions that have a major contribution in advancing and empowering peace in society, now places of worship are institutions that teach intolerant which leads to acts of violence. The existence of places of worship as public spaces is expected to be able to encourage the development of moderate religions that promote religious tolerance and peace by strengthening the role of religion in socio-political life in the community.

Places of worship for religious people have a central position, in addition to a space to glorify God and a social message of humanity to be disseminated to the community. Places of

worship are strategic spaces to encourage the creation of religious societies that uphold human values. Places of worship in principle have the main characteristic as a public space to spread peace through counter-narratives of intolerance and deradicalization by promoting the image and message of humanity but today the character is precisely the opposite of the existing reality. Places of worship turn to be "agents" to seed intolerance to others through various media. The presence of Islamist activism in the community has a negative impact on the existence of places of worship because it makes it a place to spread intolerance and divide Muslims themselves. So far, through Islamist places of worship activism has entered all walks of life and threatened the existence of traditional cultural Islam such as NU, both ideology and verbal expression through religious activities that contain elements of intolerance and provocation. The target of Islamist activism is the traditional Islamic masses to stay away from their ideology and community. Their existence became an anti-thesis for traditional Islam in Indonesia (Mibtadin 2018), especially Ngargoyoso Karanganyar Surakarta.

The function of places of worship has shifted, from a medium that encourages life change in religious practice and the formation of people to an ideological medium for seeding hatred, judging other groups, and misdirection that eventually gives rise to violent ideologies (Mibtadin 2018). The form of resistance of cultural movements is present in society to counter discourse on Islamist activism. One of them is the interfaith women's community "Sekar Ayu" was born a place of worship to strengthen interfaith dialogue in Ngargoyoso. This article narrates Sekar Ayu's role in promoting a tolerant and peaceful religious narrative to the people of Ngargoyoso. Places of worship as spaces for religious encounters and religious shia can be developed as social and cultural capital of the

interfaith women's community "Sekar Ayu" in strengthening social resilience so that it is not only a means of implementing ceremonial religious worship routines.

## **Literature Review**

Studies on faith-based women's social movements have been carried out in the form of research and writings in various sources. First, about religious views on women can be seen in the research of Anuar Arif (2017), Ita Rosita (2017), Helfina Ariyanti (2016), Putri Alya Nurhaliza (2021), Andi Bahri (2015), Moh Najmi (2017), Heliyanti (2020), and others that place women in important positions in religions. Meanwhile, research on the women's movement for peace as in the writings of Mibtadin (2020), Umma Farida (2019), Ismiati (2016), Sentiela Octaviana, et al., (2014), Nurul Istiana Hasan (2020), and others generally talks about the importance of the role of women in realizing religious values-based peace. There are also studies on interfaith women's social movements such as the research of Retno Wahyuningsih (2019), Yusuf Baihaqi (2022), Saf Malina Aja (2019), Diane Butler (2019), Judith Gubler (2020), Sumayyah Bhatoos and Uma Bhowon (2018), and other writings. From the studies above, there has been no research that specifically examines interfaith women's social movements based on places of worship, in this case the "Sekar Ayu" Ngargoyoso Karanganyar community. The absence of this research is an empty space to fill and to discuss more deeply.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Interfaith women are a community of women who come from different religions such as Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism to voice the interests of realizing social justice and peace in society, in this case Ngargoyoso Karanganyar. The interfaith

women's movement is present and consensual on women's issues, morality, diversity, and social reality. The phenomenon that occurs in religious conflicts is one of the most victims is women (Hermawati, Paskarina, dan Runiawati 2016). Women who are members of their respective interfaith communities have had personal experiences, so they are moved to be activists of harmony and peace based on places of worship in order to strengthen fellow women by fighting for the dignity of their humanity. The experience of diversity that interfaith women have, in this case Sekar Ayu, comes from what the subject experiences directly related to women's issues, religion, harmony, and peace based on places of worship. They experience discrimination in the name of gender, religion, belief, and even lack of recognition from various quarters. Spiritually, those who belong to interfaith women subjectively have experiences related to their religious beliefs, traditions, and doctrines regarding harmony and peace.

The phenomenon of interfaith women gaining space when the structure of political opportunity opened wide after the 1998 reforms encouraged the emergence of diverse religious ideologies present in the public sphere, some even expressing their religion formally. This makes the public sphere an area of scramble to press for agendas and interests. As a result democracy developed wildly like a "market of ideas" with religious discourse to the point of overload. Whether real or virtual that is used jointly by society to negotiate ideas and interests, including religious interests (Hadirman 2009). The discourse of Islam in the public sphere contains the political dimension of various social forces trying to publicly articulate their interests to the state (Habermas 1991). As a result the emergence of intolerance as a global phenonema that can be found in all religions. The phenomenon is an act of violence in the name of religion that

continues during the wrong response. Religious discourse needs to be contextualized so that violent theology is not used as a justification for justifying intolerant acts.

This phenomenon confirms Soloraya is the realm of Islamist activism events in which there is a network of local, national, and trans-national theorists (Faishol 2012). The strengthening of the movement indicates four things: first, it poses a serious threat to moderate groups and traditional Islam. Second, the movement poses a threat to the integrity of Indonesia and Pancasila. Their presence aims to replace Pancasila with the Islamic caliphate. Third, it threatens social diversity; and fourth, it poses a serious threat to the existence of women in space because it will place them as objects of history and domestication. They rated women as second-class creatures and worthy of shackling in the domestic space. This reality describes Soloraya including Ngargoyoso as a place for the growth and development of Islamist activism that carries takfiri and intolerant theology. It is measured by several things: first, an intolerant attitude, unwilling to value the opinions and beliefs of others. Secondly, a bigoted attitude, self-righteousness and judging the other wrong. Thirdly, an exclusive attitude, distinguishing oneself from the habits of the general public. Fourth, a revolutionary attitude and tend to use violence to achieve goals (Fananie 2002).

### **Peace Based on Places of Worship**

The emergence of place-of-worship violence originated from the weak historical consciousness that encouraged the emergence of dissociates of certain groups of people with the real reality in society. It can be seen from the theme carried by Islamic activism in Soloraya, including Ngargoyso carrying the issue of caliphate, Christianization, and sharia enforcement. A historical theme of the

past whose memory is tried to be revealed and forced back to the present day. Sociologically, Ngargoyoso is a buffer area providing open opportunities for socio-religious understandings and ideologies to develop. Intolerant movements that promote violence based on places of worship have gained fertile ground to develop on the outskirts of Surakarta, including Ngargoyoso. Because Soloraya became the home of the abangans and the spiritual pockets of believers scattered in various buffer areas. Surakarta has long been the political, cultural, and religious center of its buffer area including Karanganyar, in it Ngargoyoso.

A place of worship is a spiritual space as well as a forum for community empowerment, solving social problems, and building cultural resilience. The existence of a place of worship is to increase faith and devotion to God and build sensitivity to social conditions in the surrounding environment. Places of Worship have a prominent role as social institutions to maintain good relations between individuals and society. Places of worship have an ideological foundation as centers of social empowerment by increasing and developing the capacity of their worshippers based on their potential. Community empowerment through places of worship does not make it as an object, but as an active actor who directs the community to act, to interpret, to string together the meaning of its actions so that it finally becomes a common sense. The ideal picture of the place of worship has begun to shift since the rollout of reforms.

The discourse of intolerance based on places of worship in Indonesia emerged massively after the end of the New Order. The Reformation brought new changes to social, political, religious, cultural, economic, and religious life. The democratic space formed after the collapse of the New Order opened up opportunities for Islamists to articulate their political aspirations and religious ideologies aggressively, reactively, and

demonstratively (Mibtadin 2017). Indonesia is like a house that opens its doors wide to all social elements including anti-mainstream religious movements that carry violent ideologies. The ideology developed along with the influx of trans-national Islam such as Hibur Tahrir (HT), Ikwatul Muslimin (IM), Salafi, Jihadi, and Tabligh Pilgrims. In the community, this trans-national Islamic movement is transforming to form new nodes at the local level such as through halaqoh and small studies in mosques. Their movement was also strengthened by establishing educational institutions, media, and non-profit charity institutions based on places of worship oriented towards ideological interests.

## RESEARCH METHOD

Research on strengthening places of worship in promoting tolerance and peace narratives in society, especially women who belong to the interfaith community "Sekar Ayu" is descriptive qualitative research. With this research, it is hoped that it will be able to reveal the existing meaning of the thoughts and actions of the research (Strauss dan Corbin 2007). The underlying thing about the election of Sekar Ayu Ngargoyoso is the strengthening of the dynamics of religious movements that carry intolerant ideologies. First, geographically Ngargoyoso is a buffer area for Surakarta's life both economically, politically, socially, culturally, and religiously. Ngargoyoso is a mountainous region that became an area of expansion of religious movements from Surakarta marked by the development of educational institutions with trans-national Islamic ideology. Second, historically Ngargoyoso religious ideology has a vulnerability in the spread of intolerance based on places of worship. The Islamist activism movement thrived and also spread its ideology actively based on places of worship. Through the *taklimul qurra* movement emerged educational institutions and places of



worship that promoted trans-national Islamic ideology with a spirit of violence. The practice of local traditions of the people began to be muzzled under the pretext of religious purification. The proliferation of Islamism is influential and has the support of a social environment conducive to the seeding of intolerant ideologies

This research uses a sociological approach to religion, namely religion as social actions and facts, something real can be observed and affect people's behavior (Sodik 2006). Religion is a belief system embodied in certain social behaviors (Fisher 2002). The sociology of religion approach studies the social aspects of religion (Suprayogo, 2003). Data collection was carried out in two ways: direct observation and in-depth interviews about the role of interfaith women "Sekar Ayu" in promoting tolerance and peace narratives in the Ngargoyoso Karanganyar community. In-depth observation is carried out by participating in activities carried out by Sekar Ayu such as events for places of worship, mutual cooperation in cleaning places of worship, parenting, drinking tea together, and other religious social activities. Interviews were conducted on several Sekar Ayu figures such as Mrs. Detty Setyawati (chairman), Esti Nurhidayah, Julia Paini, Endang S, Eka Suci and stake holders such as Anas Ajudin (PSAP), and others. Its data analysis uses an interactive analysis model including data reduction, data delivery, and drawing conclusions. Existing conclusions are tested for validity by data triangulation and informant reviews.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Public Space, *Sekar Ayu*, and Social Resilience: a Discourse

Ngargoyoso is a subdistrict in Karanganyar Regency with an area of 65.34 Km<sup>2</sup>, with a population of 35. 845 inhabitants. Administratively, this district consists of 9

villages, namely: Berjo, Puntuk Rejo, Kemuning, Nglegok, Ngargoyoso, Jatirejo, Dukuh, Gemawang, Segara Gunung, and Girimulya. All formal state-recognized religions exist and are embraced by the Ngargoyoso people. This district became a base for developing intolerant religious movements due to the easy access to this area. A touch of modernization encourages its people to improve their social systems that are resistant to cultural shifts, including the threat of intolerance. Ngargoyoso people are mountainous communities that have a unique religious pattern that is religious but still cultured. This "natural" view of life in society eventually influenced the way religion is in their daily lives.

Ngargoyoso can be a pilot project to develop community resilience to prevent intolerant ideologies from developing. Ngargoyoso has a large social capital in the form of 134 mosques, 25 mosques, 7 Protestant churches, and 6 temples in which there are religious leaders, communities, and mass organizations. The interfaith women's community "Sekar Ayu" is present in the plural Ngargoyoso public space. Sekar Ayu is an interfaith community initiated by the Center for the Study of Religion and Peace (PSAP) Surakarta with Imparsial in 2020. Sekar Ayu has several activity programs to strengthen tolerance and peace education for interfaith women such as parenting seminars, shredded and herbal medicine making training, family gatherings, anjangsana places of worship, and others. This community is held by Detty Setyawati with 24 members consisting of Muslim women, Hindus, Protestants, and Christians. In addition to Sekar Ayu, for the youth, PSAP and Imparsial initiated the interfaith community "Laskar Pelangi" hobby-based and fun activities to strengthen interfaith dialogue. In religious leaders, there is an interfaith community "Janur Lawu" with the chairman Sunardi aimed at strengthening the culture of peace in Ngargoyoso.

Their presence in Ngargoyoso's public spaces became an arena for interfaith encounters through religious forums, hobby communities, cultural preservation, and social resilience. Geographically Ngargoyoso is far from urban as a virgin area therefore the threat of intolerance can be present in this region as a result of the expansion of Islamist ideological movements such as Pesantren Salman Al-Farisi, Isy Karima, Al-Irshad, Forsitamas, and MTA. Their presence is to find "new space" for the ideological establishment of Islamism which is considered less friendly to local traditions. Its presence in Ngargoyoso's public spaces is marked by the large number of places of worship built by Isy Karima and Al-Irshad that have the potential to be a threat to acts of intolerance in different faiths, especially related to culture.

Their existence aims to purify religion, judging that the religious traditions of the community mixed with local culture are a form of deviation from religious teachings. They call it "*laisa minal Islam*" such as *manaqib al-barjanzi*, *kondangan*, *merti dusun*, *gugur gunung*, *bersih desa*, *sedekah bumi*, and other village traditions. This makes the Ngargoyoso people vulnerable to the spread of cultural-based intolerance. The existence of intolerant ideologies has the potential to muzzle local culture and living traditions wrapped in religious narratives under the pretext of purification. This encouraged the importance of strengthening social resilience in Ngargoyoso in the form of cultural resistance to the Islamist activism movement. One of them is by strengthening religious discourse, dialogue between religious people, and developing a culture of peace through interfaith communities such as Laskar Pelangi, Janur Lawu, and Sekar Ayu.

The democratic space formed after the collapse of the New Order opened up opportunities

for Islamists to articulate their political aspirations and religious ideologies aggressively, reactively, and demonstratively (Mibtadin 2017). Islamist activism movements that lead to intolerance can be counteracted by strengthening social resilience with a cultural approach. Ngargoyoso has the potential to be developed to counteract religious intelligence with cultural movements ranging from art communities, *srawung budaya*, hobby communities, networks between religious people, believers, religious leaders, women's organizations, interfaith youth, and other elements of civil society. This is in line with the principle of community in Ngargoyoso, as stated by Detty Setyawati :

*"Through the noble traditions, the Ngargoyoso community can encourage the spirit of belonging to each other, nurturing, and taking care of fellow citizens. Various socio-cultural religious activities in Ngargoyoso that can be a "gathering space" such as gotong royong, bersih desa, rasulan, merti dusun, recitation together, and cultural performances such as wayang kulit and ketoprak. In addition, floklare can unite society from division so that it can face the threat of intolerance. The expression pager mangkok luwih becik tinimbang pager tembok implies a spirit for the Ngargoyoso community to develop a tradition to continue to be able to take care of each other"* (Tetty interview, 23/8/2020).

Sekar Ayu strengthened the social resilience of the Ngargoyoso people who had previous immunity in the form of social ties, cultural systems, and maturity in religion. This can be seen from the survival and running of rural community traditions such as clean villages, coexistence, mutual aid, and mutual care attitudes are still well maintained. This reality comes to be its own typology as a genuine village where the community offers politeness, friendliness, *nyedulur*, *nyanak*, *ngadang*, and a strong *handarbeni* attitude. The existence of Sekar Ayu, Laskar Pelangi, and Janur Lawu is an additional pillar of civil society and social capital in developing tolerance and peace that is naturally embedded in the Ngargoyoso

community. They indirectly carry out cultural resistance to the new culture that comes that is not in line with local values such as forms of intolerance of religious traditions. Cultural struggle is the strength of civic culture to develop social resilience while upholding local traditions, folklore, customs, and arts of rural communities so that the principles of *tepo sliro*, *ngajeni*, and *ayem tentrem* are maintained in Ngargoyoso.

Another social value that Sekar Ayu has the potential to develop as a counter discourse for radicalism is the communal and friendly culture of the Ngargoyoso community. In principle, the diversity of mountain communities is much more open to novelty than urban communities. This is supported by the climate, geography, and open-mindedness of their people who can accept anyone, and they think all things are basically good. Moreover, the Ngargoyoso people are people who like and love culture, so with a cultural approach they can be easily invited to communicate and exchange cultures. This is known as the resilience capacity that a social system has when it is disturbed and is able to maintain its functions and controls. In Ngargoyoso, there are many socio-cultural institutions with a local style that can be used to drive community resilience from the threat of intolerance and other ideologies that are not in line with the cultural breath of the local community. Community resilience is measured by the amount of disruption that the system can tolerate and still survive, for example by the People's Market festival held ahead of the anniversary of the village, *Srawung Seni*, *Grebeg Lawu*, and others. Therefore, it is necessary to activate the role of society in promoting a tolerant and peaceful religious social narrative in society. Cultural and spiritual communities into spaces of encounter can be developed into social capital for the Ngargoyoso community to strengthen social resilience to prevent intolerance.

### **Sekar Ayu and the Empowerment of Interfaith Women**

The Sekar Ayu community plays a major role in building a developed and civilized society both through religious, cultural, and peace education discourses. Sekar Ayu through social, religious, and cultural activities based on places of worship emphasizes the importance of character building and nation building as a point of view in solving problems of state life today such as intolerance, religious radicalism, and the fading of the national identity of the younger generation. Through the dialogue of religious anra, Sekar Ayu hopes to form a civilized, developed, and cultured Ngargoyoso society based on *hubbul wathon minal iman*. Sekar Ayu became a character building medium through the empowerment of interfaith women with parenting activities, outbound, workshops, *rujukan*, and casual chats (*ngobras*) about religion and peace. Sekar Ayu puts forward two mandates, namely *al-diniyyah* and *al-wathoniyyah*, this community seeks to build the character and identity of the nation through the empowerment of women so that they have a contribution to improving education on peace, tolerance, and social resilience based on places of worship. Sekar Ayu encourages the involvement of women in public spaces in religious social activities to campaign for peace, tolerance, gender, citizenship, and religious rights.

Sekar Ayu became part of a place-based cultural movement to encourage the independence of public knowledge of religious aspects and strengthen the narrative of tolerance, peace, and counter-radicalism. Sekar Ayu provides a limit on morality for instilling critical awareness in the Ngargoyoso community, especially women, by placing tolerance and peace as moral forces for social change. With the reality of a plural society, the ability to find common ground is very decisive in empowering civil society (Wahid 1998). In this

case Esti Nur stated :

*"Sekar Ayu's strategy in empowering interfaith women goes through three stages: first, mapping women's problems including intolerance and radicalism in Ngargoyoso society is a problem that must be responded to. Second, mobilizing the potential of interfaith women according to their fields; and third, in the future, Sekar Ayu members can be independent. Sekar Ayu's focus is on women's empowerment directed at moderate religious development, family education, national issues, and strengthening local culture as a counter-narrative to intolerant. This was done by Sekar Ayu to grow public awareness on the basis of strengthening civil culture as a development of the character and identity of al-diniyyah and al-wathoniyah members"* (Esti interview, 15/9/2020).

Sekar Ayu in strengthening the capacity of women to place religion as a tool of empowerment by creating public spaces such as family gatherings, training in making shredded and herbal medicine, as well as eating together in it are inserted the values of plurality, tolerance, and peace. In civil society empowerment, religion is understood as a public religion considering that the public context of religion is no longer the state or society but in civil society (Baso 2006). Religion in strengthening civil society emphasizes the empowerment of the lower community by keeping a distance from the state even though it does not deny its existence (Mibtadin 2021). State power can be balanced by the power of community independence by placing religion as a social ethic for society as the basis of the Sekar Ayu community. The empowerment of Sekar Ayu women is based on the vision of social transformation, cultural renewal, and awareness of the right to society in the state. Through this Sekar Ayu leads to a just social structure, a dynamic society, develops populist leadership, and encourages the emergence of female local figures. Sekar Ayu women's empowerment is concerned with the realization of community independence where tolerance is upheld for urging peace, and

mutual respect between religious groups.

Sekar Ayu places religion as a social ethic because of two things: first, religion as the source and vision of morality. For Sekar Ayu, religion is not only a source of conflict and intolerance, but also a guardian of morality because it can kill the initiative and creativity of the religious community itself. Sekar Ayu with social, religious, and cultural activities based on places of worship wants religion to always be present in the community, borrowing the term Sudarminta so that religion is more dynamic so that it can play a role in the midst of human life. Second, religion as a giver of a sense of peace that supports human civilization. The sense of peace arising from God's belief is a measure of world harmony where religious truth is explicit regarding the value of morality. This approach encourages religious people to be open and to learn from each other so that religion needs to be more meaningful for common life (Mibtadin 2018).

For Sekar Ayu, religion as a social ethic and spirit carries out social, cultural, and religious transformations for its members in order to create a society that is tolerant, civilized, and respects the value of locality. With his social capital, Sekar Ayu was able to make an important contribution in shaping the character of the Ngargoyoso community :

*"Its existence (Sekar Ayu) is progressive and dynamic in encouraging harmony, harmony, and peace between religious groups. The integration of sekar Ayu, places of worship, and society eventually formed a close system of a society tied to the nuances of a moderate, culturally based religious ideology. Some of the religious values developed by Sekar Ayu underlie life practices such as togetherness and the benefit of life in the Ngargoyoso community"* (interview Julia, 6/8/2020).

In carrying out women's empowerment, Sekar Ayu intersects with various social groups with different interests. Sekar Ayu hopes that the



place of worship and different religious people in Ngargoyoso will function well as an early warning system of intolerance and radicalism so that they can coexist and respect each other. Sekar Ayu with his activities seeks to educate life through education, social, cultural, and religious so as to make a real contribution to realizing a just and civilized society. The empowerment of Sekar Ayu strengthens the position of women as *'imadul bilad* and *wasiya al-taqalid al-diniya* with a moderate style or "*sak madya*" passing on the spirit of nationality to the next generation. This commitment to nationality, tolerance, anti-violence, and accommodation of local culture is the principle of religious moderation practiced by Sekar Ayu by taking into account the objective conditions of the plural Ngargoyoso community without compromising the basic teachings of the religion itself. So far, Sekar Ayu has an open religious understanding that puts forward the values of *al-ukhuwah al-wathoniyah* and *al-insaniyah*.

A friendly religious model based on local culture can shape the character and identity of a nation that is polite, tolerant, and avoids exclusive and radical religious understanding because it can break national unity. Sekar Ayu positions himself as an agent of social, cultural, and religious change based on places of worship by taking an active role in solving problems that exist in Ngargoyoso society. Sekar Ayu plays an important role in improving the quality of religious understanding and national identity for Ngargoyoso interfaith women both in terms of discourse, pluralism, and Indonesianness. For Sekar Ayu, the strengthening of the narrative of peace, tolerance, and the preservation of local culture is not limited to epistemology in the discourse space but is applied. The religious display is moderate and friendly not only for academic purposes but for the improvement of the quality of life of women and the virtuous,

civilized, and cultured Ngargoyoso society. Sekar Ayu became a public space for inter-religious dialogue as a form of life dialogue that was not only elitist but populist.

### ***Sekar Ayu*, Transformative Theology, and Life Dialogue: from Elitist to Populist**

The model of interfaith dialogue developed by civil society elements is a dialogue of sustainable life. A dialogue that begins with a critical attitude towards one's own religion. This dialogue embracing the deconstruction of dialogue participants' understanding of their fundamental understanding of their own religion. The principle of this dialogue is expected to obtain the readiness of dialogue participants to accept the truth that other religions have. Through this awareness, dialogue participants no longer talk about symbolic differences more about the essential similarities of each religion (Nafi' 2001). The interfaith dialogue of the Sekar Ayu interfaith women's community starts from a critical attitude towards her own religion whether it brings the benefit of society or vice versa. This dialogue requires a new theology that can be transformed in the realm of praxis in society.

Departing from this essential understanding, inter-religious dialogue shifted towards life dialogue, as Sekar Ayu did which gave birth to a tolerant, inclusive, and pluralist perspective. The pluralist viewpoint seeks to be critical of one's own beliefs and open to the truths of other religions outside of itself that are used as a medium for interfaith cooperation. This places religion as a spirit of social transformation in society at large (Siraj 2013). Sekar Ayu's interfaith dialogue is a form of transformative theological development. Theology that considers faith as an inseparable part of morality actualized in law that must be obeyed and carried out in every aspect of human life (Fazlurrahman 1994). Theology is

based on the value of universal religious morality which entrusts to be transformed into the praxis of life of the Ngargoyoso people. Through Sekar Ayu theology, it can strengthen the religious understanding of interfaith women as universal and moderate so as to prevent conflicts in society.

For Sekar Ayu, transformative theology is used to encourage creative religious processes, responsibility, and develop life based on the values of morality, tolerance, and welfare. This theology presupposes a difference and intertwining between religion that has an absolute dimension and a relative religion. Religiousness is seen as an attempt by religious people to approach something absolute. This attitude prevents religious people from acts of violence and disputes between religious institutions (Budiyono 1983). The transformative theology developed by Sekar Ayu through interfaith dialogue for women has resulted in an attitude of tolerance between religious groups with a new understanding of religion, namely tolerance and pluralism. For Sekar Ayu, tolerance is an effort to enable an interfaith women's community so that potential conflicts can be suppressed to a minimum through social, cultural, and religious activities. While pluralism for Sekar Ayu to show the reality of religious diversity in Ngargoyoso both Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Protestantism, and devotees, interfaith women are required to be actively involved in caring for the existing plurality. For Sekar Ayu, caring for diversity is based on honesty, earnestness, and not doing justification for yourself.

The main points of new understanding in religious tolerance developed by Sekar Ayu through inter-religious dialogue are: first, the spirit of religiosity (*ar-ruh ad-diniyah*). Spirit understands religion correctly and comprehensively. Fostering the spirit of religiosity by returning religious people to the substance of true religious teachings, humanizing humans with

all their humanity (Mibtadin 2021). Sekar Ayu believes that all religions are derived to uplift the dignity of human beings by *memayu hayuning pribadi*, *memayu keluarga*, *memayu hayuning bangsa*, and *memayu hayuning bawana*. Second, the spirit of nationalism (*ar-ruh al-wathoniyah*) Sekar Ayu considers the Ngargoyoso community to be ideologically and nationally bound by the Republic of Indonesia. Religious people in Ngargoyoso are obliged to love the homeland where they live and breathe. Love is based on responsibility for its role by putting aside existing differences and putting nationalism above all else. For Sekar Ayu, the spirit of nationalism is used to encourage religious people, especially women, to move towards a point of equality over views on peace, tolerance, and national unity.

Third, the spirit of tolerance (*ar-ruh ta'adudiyah*). Through this principle, Sekar Ayu views that religious diversity must be based on religious awareness of the value of universal truth of religion. The value of tolerance can encourage religious people to a comprehensive understanding because each religion has similarities with others and has its own peculiarities so that differences are a necessity. At its peak, Sekar Ayu assessed *sedaya agama niku sae* and *agama ageming aji*, all religions have the same essential foundation, namely transcendental esoteric and exoteric humanity. Sekar Ayu considers that the spirit of tolerance is important to be presented in the Ngargoyoso public sphere through inter-religious dialogue because truth often appears in a plural form even though the truth is essentially one, which comes from God. Fourth, the spirit of humanitas (*ar-ruh al-insaniyah*), Sekar Ayu encourages women to uphold human values in the daily life of the plural Ngargoyoso community, giving rise to mutual respect for other different religions. According to Kung, in global ethics, norms are carried out based on the universal value of religion so that

it can unite religious people in a social context. There are three global concessions: there is no life without having a global ethic; there is no peace without religious peace; and there is no religious peace without religious dialogue (Kung 2000b).

The development of tolerance in the form of inter-religious dialogue based on places of worship by Sekar Ayu places religion as a social ethic as well as an instrument of strengthening tolerance by creating public spaces for joint activities. According to Baso, in the empowerment of civil society religion is understood as a public religion considering that the public context of religion is no longer the state or society but in civil society (Baso 2006). Religion in the process of strengthening civil society uses a social transformation approach, emphasizing empowerment in the lower communities by keeping a distance from the state even though it does not reject the existence of the state (Mibtadin 2017):

*"Sekar Ayu's inter-religious dialogue is a form of life dialogue, a local culture-based dialogue in the form of nguwongke wong as the most humane award 'nguwoyongke wong.' The Ngargoyoso community as part of Javanese culture has its own worldview, namely the concept of harmony. Mabda' al-hayah is built on the main principle of the need to avoid conflict and prioritize living in harmony. These two principles are carried out by Sekar Ayu based on respect for religious differences aimed at creating harmony and harmony in life" (interview Rio Kurniawan, 23/8/2020).*

It can be understood from the statement above, the maturity of Sekar Ayu's religious tolerance and the Ngargoyoso community can be seen from the growing value of speech, *sedaya agama niku sae* and *agama ageming aji*. The condition of harmony for the Javanese people is sought in every situation so as to create peace (Prabowo 2003). Through life dialogue, Sekar Ayu developed the *paugeran* of the Ngargoyoso community that: *rukun agawe sentosa, crah*

*agawe bubrah, urip iku kudu urup, and ojo seneng tumindak daksiyo, and urip iku kudu welas asih mrang liyan.* The principle of harmony and harmony developed by Sekar Ayu can lead to the condition of the Ngargoyoso community to *toto titi tentrem kerto raharjo*. This is in line with what Anas Aijudin said :

*"Sekar Ayu's goal is to develop the value of tolerance through sharing about life problems in society, both social, religious, and cultural, that are prone to conflict. By developing life dialogue, Sekar Ayu develops to be an effective non-violent medium to respond to intolerance and radicalism within society. Through tolerance-based life dialogue, Sekar Ayu campaigns to learn to be open, democratic, and tolerant as a humane effort to view plurality as a necessity" (Anas Aijudin interview, 11/9/2020).*

Life dialogue encourages people's willingness to understand differences from the point of view of religious people even without having to follow their beliefs as truth. Dialogue is not a debate that views something in the beliefs of dialogue partners in our point of view (W.Shenk dan D.Kataregga 2007). Dialogue is expected to foster awareness and change of attitudes so as to produce a productive consensus in life (Swidler 2000). Sekar Ayu's model life dialogue for interfaith women places religion as the main characteristic that characterizes a civilization. That is, fostering religious life does not have to change the traditions and culture of the local people (Dawson 1950). Sekar Ayu's inter-religious dialogue encourages religious cooperation so as to create harmony, harmony, and peace in the community. Dialogue can be more open and inclusive so that it reflects polite, humble, and respectful behavior. Sekar Ayu's inter-religious dialogue can be a new hope with a form of cooperation between religious groups in their daily behavior without losing the character of each religion so that its identity, symbols, and existence are maintained.

## **From Women to Peace: Dialogue as a Social Bridge**

The implications of Sekar Ayu's interfaith dialogue are far-reaching. Not only does it build public awareness about tolerance, peace, but it also makes it a social bridge between interfaith women's communities in Ngargoyoso. Sekar Ayu in building a peace narrative is based on several things. First, Sekar Ayu makes inter-religious dialogue as a counterweight to information and discourse of other religions such as Islam for non-Muslims, be it Stolic, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, and devotees in Ngargoyoso or vice versa. The existence of Sekar Ayu is important because of the many misinformation and assumptions received by other religious people. For example, the concept of jihad in Islam they consider it a form of religious violence. Some religious groups use the term "*jihad*" as a way of committing intolerance. In the name of *jihad* they humiliate their religion and God by degrading human dignity through the violence displayed.

According to (Kimball 2003), the existence of religion is not sterile from various human desires and interests so that at a certain time religion sacrifices man in the name of God. Religion becomes evil because it encourages symptoms of dehumanization that hurt human values, one of which is by promoting attitudes and acts of intolerance. Religion ideally claims to carry the essential message of peace, but in the context of life it is quite the opposite. Religious people do not hesitate to embarrass themselves and their God by conflicting in the name of differences and defense of religion (Muhaimin 2003). The emergence of intolerant acts on various forms of dehumanization has brought religion independent of its ideal value of universal human values.

Second, Sekar Ayu as a community is a forum for channeling the aspirations of religious

people in Ngargoyoso, especially non-Muslims, to convey their conscience. Sekar Ayu as part of civil society became a channel to voice interests in the midst of the life of a predominantly Muslim community. So far, they feel that they do not have the channels to convey their aspirations in realizing harmonious relations between religious groups. The existing socio-religious groups are considered unable to bridge the aspirations of religious people, especially the interfaith women's community. The presence of Sekar Ayu in the community has a strong commitment to develop peace in the midst of social and religious plurality in Ngargoyoso. Third, the community considers Sekar Ayu as a community representing a moderate religious pattern to encourage peace based on places of worship. This is in line with the Eka Suci :

*"Sekar Ayu became a counter narrative to the religious movement that proclaimed intolerance in the name of religion and places of worship. So far, they have voiced intolerance in Ngargoyoso actively their voices are heard by the wider community because they are successful in framing ideas in the public sphere even though they are in percentage terms and are reactive. Sekar Ayu as a force of civil society and cultural movement brings an inclusive and tolerant perspective to all religions. Sekar Ayu became a big umbrella for the interfaith religious life of the Ngargoyoso people"* (Eka interview, 17/9/2020).

Sekar Ayu with an inter-religious dialogue model is a form of peace education for life development to be more mature in a heterogeneous society. This is related to the problem of religious doctrine and understanding that gave birth to the ideology of intolerance so that his perspective became exclusive and did not accept the other as a necessity in his life. This attitude is an obstacle to interfaith dialogue in Ngargoyoso. The dialogue that has been going on so far has been good Sekar Ayu's presence in public spaces gives its own color by featuring women based on places of worship carrying a mission of peace.



This encourages the religious maturity of the community in addressing plurality, which can be seen by the formation of social nodes as a form of plurality awareness and strengthening civil socio-cultural resilience. The knots are as the adhesive medium of a peaceful harmonious life. The presence of Sekar Ayu inspired the emergence of socio-religious groups that collectively promote peace and reconciliation.

Sekar Ayu is a meeting space for the peace education process and an important pillar in preventing intolerant movements by involving elements in the community so that social resilience and sustainable peace are formed. The community hopes that inter-religious dialogue will continue to be carried out by Sekar Ayu as a bridge, communication function, and peaceful action in the Ngargoyoso community. The existence of Sekar Ayu as a community places religion as the basis of morality to encourage the realization of a prosperous, peaceful, and safe society. Third, the pattern of society as a form of dialogue between Sekar Ayu's life and religious social groups outside of himself. As part of civil society, Sekar Ayu puts forward the principle of tolerance in his social movements. It is hoped that it can further mature the maturity of the community in managing the differences that exist in the midst of Islamic activism which carries religious patterns that are intolerant, reactive, carry violence, and local anti-culture as an approach. Through the peace narrative, Sekar Ayu displays a moderate religious model to the point that it resists all forms of violence, especially those that threaten the realization of a plural society like Ngargoyoso. Religion wants its people to coexist without spreading hatred and violence against other groups. Sekar Ayu with intolerant handling is a humanity approach that puts religious people in Ngargoyoso as human beings with all their humanity.

## CONCLUSION

Sekar Ayu's interfaith women's community as part of the Ngargoyoso civil society socio-religious movement has been actively developing a culture of peace through continuous life dialogue with its activities. First, Sekar Ayu actively builds communication and dialogue between religious people and advocates for humanitarian issues at the lower community level based on places of worship. Second, Sekar Ayu became a space for interfaith community encounters with its activities such as places of worship and family gatherings which included discussions about religious, social, and cultural issues as a form of life dialogue as well as a form of transformative theology. Third, Sekar Ayu conducted seminars, training on shredded and herbal medicine, and women's empowerment aimed at building a mutually beneficial life between religious groups in Ngargoyoso.

Fourth, the *anjangsana* program to the place of worship of each religion in Ngargoyoso idealizes the members of the interfaith Sekar Ayu to be able to have dialogue and experience firsthand the atmosphere of religious life of each religion. This activity can provide new experiences for Sekar Ayu members about religious life so that it is not only an assumption. Sekar Ayu's interfaith dialogue model is a sustainable dialogue of life by emphasizing an inclusive and even pluralist perspective. By such perspective, religion plays roles as social ethic and spirit for the transformation of society in the midst of the diversity that exists in Ngargoyoso. Sekar Ayu's model of inter-religious dialogue by developing a transformative theology that places faith as an inseparable part of morals is then actualized in people's lives.

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**Interview:**

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Interview with Detty Setyawati, chairman of Sekar Ayu from the Islamic religious element, 23/8/2020.

Interview with Esti Nur, treasurer of Sekar Ayu from Islamic elements, 15/9/2020.

Interview with Anas Aijuddin, director of PSAP Surakarta and initiator of Sekar Ayu, 11/9/2020.

Interview with Rio Kurniawan, Sekar Ayu companion program staff, 23/8/2020

Interview with Julia Paini, a member of Sekar Ayu from Unsur Nasrani, 6/8/2020.